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Burkhan.—By BERTHOLD LAUFER, Curator at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill.

As is well known, the word ‘Burkhan’ serves in the Buddhist literature of the Mongols for the designation of the Buddha. It has likewise been traced in Buddhist texts of the Uigur language,¹ and in Manichaean literature is the name given to the incarnate messengers of the God of Light to man.² The etymology proposed in 1866 by A. Schiefner³ to the effect that the Turkish form Purkan, as noted by Radloff, has been derived from Mongol Burkhan, and in its origin seems to be a corruption of Indian Brahman, may now be dismissed without discussion. A more tempting explanation has been advanced by Baron A. von Staël-Holstein,⁴ who believes himself to be justified in tracing Uigur *purkhan* (read *burkhan*) to Chinese 佛 *pur (read *bur) + Turkish *khan*. At first sight this hypothesis would seem convincing to the uninitiated, nevertheless it is fallacious and indefensible. As will be shown, the term *burkhan* does not represent a transcription, but is an ancient and indigenous word of the Altaic languages. The proposition of Baron von Staël-Holstein is by no means novel, but has been forestalled by his countryman P. Schmidt,⁵ who has already given in substance the same etymology for the ‘mysterious’ Mongol word Burkhan. ‘A similar root does not exist in the allied languages,’ he remarks, ‘and since the present notion conveyed by it is not of Mongol origin, I am inclined to regard it as a loan-word. This being the case, it must be derived either from Chinese or Tibetan. As regards the period when the loan took place, Buddha may have been known in Mongolia long before the introduction of Buddhism. In literary documents I have been able to trace it back to Marco Polo.⁶ The Tibetan name of Buddha is

¹ F. W. K. Müller, *Uigurica* 2, p. 77.

² Chavannes and Pelliot, *Traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine*, p. 76; F. Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*, 2, p. 336.

³ In the introduction to W. Radloff’s *Proben der Volkslitteratur der türkischen Stämme*, 2, p. xi.

⁴ In Radloff’s *Tišastvistik*, p. 142 (*Bibl. Buddhica* 12, 1910).

⁵ ‘Der Lautwandel im Mandschu und Mongolischen,’ *J. Peking Or. Soc.* 4. 63.

⁶ Polo’s spelling is *borcan* or *boream*.

said to resemble neither the Indian nor the Mongol one. We do not either get much farther with the present Chinese 佛 *Fo*. We may therefore presuppose as the root of Burkhan either the syllable *bud* in accordance with the Indian name, or the Old-Chinese **Fut*. The latter hypothesis seems to be the more probable one. The Mongol syllable *bur* contradicts neither of these suppositions. The second syllable *khan* is here either a suffix (cf. Manchu *Fucich'i*. [Buddha], from **Futich'i*), or even the well-known word *khan* (*Chan*), accordingly *Buddha Chan* = *Bud* (*Fut*) *chan* = *Burchan*.

A serious objection must be raised to this dissection of the word. There is no analogy to such a hybrid combination of a Chinese and Turkish element; and if the second component *khan* really were this alleged Turkish word, why do we never meet the fuller form *Bur-khagan*? In order to anticipate this objection, Baron von Staël-Holstein assures us that according to an oral communication of Radloff the word *khan* is frequently attached to Turkish names of gods and idols but hastens to add that he knows of no examples for this phenomenon in Turkish-Buddhistic documents. For phonetic reasons the conception of the ending *-khan* in *burkhan* as the word for 'king, sovereign' is out of the question. As is well known, the vowel of *khān*, being contracted from *khagān*, is long, whereas the *a* in *burkhan* is short. This is clearly evidenced by the writing of Kalmuk in which the long vowels are marked by the addition of a small dash: while *burkhan* (plural *burkhat*) is written in Kalmuk with a short *a*, the word *khān* (plural *khāt*) is expressly fixed with a long *a*.⁷ In the Tungusian, Mongol, and Turkish languages we find a suffix *-khan*, *-kan*, *-gan*, with such vowel changes as are conditioned by the laws of vowel-harmony, usually having the meaning of a diminutive.⁸ Whether this suffix may be recognized in *burkhan* cannot be decided. Further, we are entitled to raise the question, what authority could have induced the Uigur to style Buddha (either the one Buddha or any other Buddhas) a king or sovereign? Every one knows that Buddha never was a king, and is not so designated in any passage of Sanskrit or Chinese literature of Buddhism⁹; he was, however,

⁷ See A. Popov, *Grammar of the Kalmuk Language* (in Russian), § 62, 66.

⁸ See particularly W. Schott, *Altaische Studien I* (Abh. Berl. Akad. 1860), p. 591-594; *IV* (*ibid.* 1870), p. 275 *et seq.*

⁹ The epithet *dharmaṛāja* ('king of the law'), in Mongol *nom-un khagān*, is of course a seeming exception only, being a metaphorical expression.

the son of a king, and is therefore styled the ‘crown-prince’ (*kumārarāja, rājaputra*). The insinuation that the Uigur should have been guilty of such a gross violation of sacred tradition, as would crop out of this fantastic dismemberment *burkhan*, is an absurdity on the very face of it. That the element *khan* bears no relation to the word for ‘king’ becomes clear also from the compound *purkan kān* (‘the king purkan’) noted by Radloff¹⁰ with the meaning ‘a spirit worshiped by the shamans.’ Among the Turkmen of Khiwa, according to Radloff, the word *porkhan* even designates the shaman.¹¹ In fact, *burkhan* is a term peculiar to the ancient shamanism of Siberia, and was diffused there over an extensive area long before the introduction of Buddhism.

Among the Tungusians of Nerčinsk, M. A. Castrén¹² noted a word *burkan* with the significance ‘God,’ and derived it from Buryat *burkhan*. The same word he recorded also among the Karagas in the Altai, who speak a Turkish dialect, and there also concluded that it was adopted by them from the Buryat.¹³ True it is that the two Tungusian dialects studied by Castrén, as emphasized by Schiefner in the introduction to his work, have been strongly affected by Buryat influence both lexical and grammatical; but the word *burkan* can prove nothing along this line, as it occurs also in other Tungusian languages, particularly in that of the Gold on the lower Amur. As I spent a whole summer among this people, particularly studying its religious concepts, the word *burkhan*, as used by the Gold, is deeply stamped on my mind, for my conversations with them turned on this subject frequently, and I had a large collection of *burkhans* made for me. The best study of this subject thus far is contained in the book of P. P. Shimkevič,¹⁴ where we read as follows (p. 38): ‘With their notions concerning the life beyond

¹⁰ *Wörterbuch*, 4, col. 1368.

¹¹ As regards this double significance, compare the observation of Hubert and Mauss (*L'Année sociologique*, 7. 87): ‘L'esprit que possède le sorcier, ou qui possède le sorcier, se confond avec son âme et sa force magique: sorcier et esprit portent souvent le même nom.’

¹² *Grundzüge einer tungusischen Sprachlehre*, p. 95.

¹³ M. A. Castrén, *Koibalsche und karagassische Sprachlehre*, p. xiii, 144.

¹⁴ ‘Materials for the Study of Shamanism among the Gold (Materialy dla izuchenija šamanstva u Goldov),’ in the *Zapiski of the Amur Section of the Imp. Russian Geogr. Soc.* 2. 1 (Chabarovsk, 1896). L. Sternberg will deal with the same subject in the Publications of the Jesup Expedition.

and the existence of various spirits bringing to man luck or calamity the Gold combine a great number of most diverse gods (*burkhan*) personifying a certain spirit. Whatever work a Gold may commence, it is incumbent upon him to resort to the *burkhan* for help. The shaman appears as the mediator between him and the spirit, and has supernatural power to communicate with the spirits. According to the circumstances, the shaman orders the people to make such and such a *burkhan* and to appeal to him in accordance with established precepts, but occasionally when the *burkhan* thus made does not bring the expected advantage, he is destroyed by the shaman or exchanged for another *burkhan*. For every kind of disease, on every special occasion of life, the *burkhans* are invariably made after the direction of the shaman in a strictly prescribed order. They consist of representations of men, animals, birds, fish, and reptiles; sometimes also amulets are made in the shape of joints, palms, soles, heart, etc. As to material, they are made of wood, metal, fish-skin, paper, cloth, grass, or clods from marshes. *Burkhans* are delineated on wood, cloth, or paper, or are carved from wood, cast from tin or silver, and skilfully forged from iron.' The author then proceeds to give a classification and detailed description of the *burkhans* (p. 39-60), and in the following chapter records some legends concerned with them, many of which are figured on the plates attached to the volume. Every one will recognize that this sort of *burkhan* has not a flavor of Buddhism, but is a genuine and original shamanistic element. In fact, I did not discover among the Gold any trace of Buddhism, which has never reached the Amur. The word *burkhan* is foreign to the Manchu language. Buddha is called in Manchu *Fučihi*, *Fu-* being a transcription of the corresponding Chinese designation of Buddha, the second element -čihi being as yet unexplained.

The word *burkhan* may be traced also in ancient Chinese records; at least, this is the opinion of the Japanese scholar K. Shiratori.¹⁵ In discussing the name of the mountain T'u-t'ai 徒太 in the country of the Mo-ho or Wu-ki, Shiratori states that this mountain is also styled Pu-hien 卜彌 (anciently But-kan). He refers to a passage in the *Shan hai king* (*Ta huang pei king* 大荒北經) to the effect that 'in the desert there is

¹⁵ *Über die Sprache des Hiung-nu Stammes und der Tung-hu Stämme*, p. 60 (Tokyo, 1900).

a mountain Pu-hien, where there is also a country styled Su-shen 肅慎'; and further to *Tsin shu* (Ch. 97, p. 2 b), where it is said: 'The Su-shen tribe is also called Yi-lou, and its habitat is north of Mount Pu-hien.' Shiratori adds: 'In Mongol God is styled *tägri* or *burkhan*. Pu-hien is assumed to be a transcription of the word *burkhan*.' From a phonetic viewpoint this identification is possible, and it is equally possible that the said mountain was personified as a deity and worshiped under the title Burkhan. As is known, mountains and rivers were (and partially still are) the object of worship among all Tungusian, Mongol, and Turkish tribes (as well as in ancient China). One of the sacred mountains revered by the Mongols is the Burkhan-khaldun in northern Mongolia, on which Tchinggis Khan is said to have been interred.¹⁶ A Mongol book, dealing with sacrifices to the deity of fire, and according to the well-founded testimony of Banzarov, devoid of any Buddhistic influence, begins thus: 'Mother Ut, mistress of the fire, created from the elm-tree, growing on the summits of the mountains Khangai-khan and Burkhatu-khan!'¹⁷ These mountains are entitled 'sovereigns' (*khan*), and *burkhatu* is apparently a derivation from *burkhan* by means of the possessive suffix *-tu*, meaning as much as 'having a deity' or 'deified.' Potanin¹⁸ mentions a pass under the name Burkhan-boksin-daban, and argues that this name presumably designated a pre-Buddhistic Mongol deity, while at present it is referred to Buddha.

In the same manner as among the Gold, so also among the Mongol, *burkhan* is a fixed term of their ancient shamanistic religion which still flourishes among the Buryat. Generally speaking, *burkhan* is a synonym of *tengeri* (or *tengerin*) or *zayan*, the chief deities of the Buryat, to the number of ninety-nine, each known under his proper name.¹⁹ A special group

¹⁶ Dordji Banzarov, *The Black Faith* (in Russian), p. 21; I. J. Schmidt, *Sanang Setsen*, p. 57, 59; H. Yule, *Marco Polo*, 1. 247; G. N. Potanin, *Tanguto-Tibetan Borderland* (in Russian), 2. 303.

¹⁷ Banzarov, *op. cit.* p. 25.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.* 2. 337.

¹⁹ M. N. Khangalov, 'New Materials Relating to the Shamanism among the Buryat,' p. 1, in *Zapiski East-Sib. Section of the Russian Geogr. Soc.* vol. 2, no. 1, Irkutsk, 1890. *Burkun* and *burkhan* are dialectic variations of the word in Buryat (M. A. Castrén, *Burjäische Sprachlehre*, p. 171); *burkhyn* also occurs.

among these is formed by the *satini burkhat* (*burkha-t* being the plural of *burkhan*), who belong to the western, white gods, especially worshiped by the Buryat of Kudinsk.²⁰ Likewise in the tales and traditions of the Buryat the term *burkhan* is referred to their own gods.²¹ In several Mongol dialects the Dipper is styled *Dolon burkhyn*, in Kalmuk *Dolon burkhut*.²² Among the Turkish tribes of the Altai, as previously stated, *purkan kān* denotes a spirit worshiped by the shamans; and among the Turkmen of Khiwa the word (in the form *porkhan*) designates the shaman himself.

Burkhan in Mongol by no means conveys exclusively the limited notion of Buddha, but, first of all, signifies 'deity, god, gods,' and secondly 'representation or image of a god.' This general significance neither inheres in the term Buddha nor in Chinese Fo; neither do the latter signify 'image of Buddha'; only Mongol *burkhan* has this force, because originally it conveyed the meaning of a shamanistic image. From what has been observed on the use of the word *burkhan* in the shamanistic or pre-Buddhistic religions of the Tungusians, Mongols, and Turks, it is manifest that the word well existed there before the arrival of Buddhism, fixed in its form and meaning, and was but subsequently transferred to the name of Buddha. This being the case, it cannot represent a transcription, and the theories of P. Schmidt and Baron von Staël-Holstein should be discarded. A single concession may be made, and this is that the indigenous word *burkhan* for the designation of Buddha may have been chosen as a more or less conscious adaptation in sound to the latter.

²⁰ Khangalov, *op. cit.* p. 30.

²¹ See for instance the collection of Tales of the Buryat edited by D. G. Gomboyev, p. 24, 63, 69 (*l. c.*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1890); A. D. Rudnev, *The Khor-Buryat Dialect* (in Russian), pt. 3, p. 039.

²² Potanin, *Tanguto-Tibetan Borderland*, 2. 318, 319.